

A

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

OF

MARK AKENSIDE, M.D.,

WITH SOME

Observations on his Life and Character.

BY ROBERT WHITE.

“Come AKENSIDE, come with thine Attic urn,
Fill’d from Illyssus by the Naiad’s hand;
Thy harp was tuned to Freedom.”

POETICAL EPISTLE.

Newcastle-upon-Tyne:

M. A. RICHARDSON, 44, GREY STREET.

MDCCCXLV.



A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

OF

Mark Akenside, M. D.,

&c.



OF the classical writers who were born, or have lived in Newcastle upon Tyne, or its vicinity, none occupy a more prominent place than the author of "The Pleasures of Imagination." Believing, therefore, that a brief account of this votary of the Muses may not altogether be uninteresting to the public, especially to those who reside in the district where his perceptive faculties received their first impressions, I take up the subject with a hope to derive some gratification in glancing over the chief incidents of his life, and in drawing from his character and writings such remarks as may arise from a careful examination of the same.

The family of Akenside were for several generations yeomen, or *lairds* of a portion of land, at Eachwick, near Stamfordham, Northumberland. Mark, the poet's father, having learned the trade of a butcher, removed in early life to Newcastle, where he married,* and established himself successfully in business. His wife's name was Mary Lumsden, and both being presbyterians, were remarkably strict in the observance of religious duties. Their place of public worship was the edifice at Hanover Square, now occupied as the Unitarian chapel. They lived in a house† on the north side, and near the top of the Butcher Bank, using the ground floor as a shop for the sale of butcher meat. In one of the upper rooms, on the 9th November

* "1710 August 10. Mark Akenside and Mary Lumsden. Mar."—*Register of St. Nicholas, Newcastle.*

† It is not numbered, but according to the latest mode of notation ought to be 27. The shop and house have been modernized within the last few years, and the former is at this time, 1845, in possession of Mr. Edward Young, Grocer.



HOUSE in which AKENSIDE was born.

1721, Mark Akenside was born. He was baptized about three weeks afterwards by the Rev. Benjamin Bennet, minister of the Hanover Square congregation. The early part of his life affords few incidents worthy of record, yet I may state that in his father's shop, when he reached his seventh year, the fall of a cleaver upon his foot occasioned a halt in his gait which accompanied him through life. He received an early course of instruction at the Royal Free Grammar School, under the superintendence of the excellent Greek linguist, Richard Dawes,* author of "*Miscellanea Critica*." Some difference, however, would appear to have arisen between the master and his pupil, to which I shall afterwards allude, and the result was that the young poet quitted the school. Subsequently he made considerable progress in classical learning with Mr. Wilson, a dissenting clergyman, who to augment his slender means of support, kept an academy for a limited number of respectable pupils. During the vacations it is probable that Akenside frequently visited his relations at Eachwick, for his uncle, who resided there, most generously defrayed all the expences of his education. He gave early indication of his poetical talents by contributing,

* A memoir of R. Dawes is given in the Local Historian's Table Book, Historical Division, Vol. II. page 145.

at the age of sixteen, some poems to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which, though not included in the general collection of his works, are yet creditable to him as a writer; and shew that his reading had, even at that early period, been very extensive. About the same time, while wandering on the banks of his native stream, which then presented a more attractive prospect to a poet than at present, he acquired and cherished that love for natural scenery, which ultimately formed so distinguishing a feature in his genius. This feeling was still further developed from the circumstance that in his seventeenth year, he resided for a few months with a relative at Morpeth; and as his favourite walks were directed down the margin of the Wansbeck as far as Bothal, he had around him scenery unsurpassed for loveliness by any in the north of England. Neither, it is stated, did he spend his hours here unworthily, for with that energy so characteristic of the poetical temperament, he arranged the ground work of the production by which his name was afterwards to be distinguished. Some of his biographers, indeed, say that considerable portions of it were written at this place, and that early time of life.

The choice of a profession now occupied the thoughts of Akenside, and in his eighteenth year, he went to the college of Edinburgh, to qualify himself for becoming a dissenting minister. This step was perhaps hastily taken, for he remained only one year with that aim before him; and then abandoning it in all likelihood without the weighty consideration it deserved, he entered on the study of medicine. At this period the dissenters in England maintained a fund, which they appropriated to the education of young men in limited circumstances, who were desirous of entering the ministry; and the poet, having availed himself of money from this source, repaid it most honourably on relinquishing the design for which it had been received. His progress as a medical student, during the two subsequent years he remained at Edinburgh was very great, and possessing, in addition to his talent for poetical composition, an extensive knowledge of philosophy, he acquired the intimacy and respect of a valuable circle of friends. Several of his printed poems were also written at this date: he was elected a member of the Medical Society; and during the public debates which occurred in the college, he acquitted himself so eloquently, that Robertson, the future historian, then a young man, was frequently induced to attend the meetings for the sole purpose of hearing him speak. Indeed, it is said, that about this time, he felt so confident of his ability as a public speaker, that he seriously cherished the idea of obtaining a seat in parliament.

It may be observed that from a very early age, scientific intercourse less or more had been maintained between the northern part

of the kingdom, and the chief places of learning on the Continent. To all destined for the higher professions, whether in physic, the law, or theology, an education was not considered sufficient, unless completed either at a French, a Dutch, or German University. In accordance, therefore, with the prevailing sentiments of the day, Akenside removed in 1741 to Leyden that he might thereby enjoy an opportunity of perfecting his medical studies. During his stay there, he continued to employ his pen in poetical composition, and finally adjusted the work which has proved the most durable monument of his fame. In professional science, he also made such progress, that in May, 1744, he took his degree of Doctor in Physic, and, according to custom, published an inaugural dissertation, highly honourable to his talents both as a physician and philosopher. But his most important acquisition at this place was the friendship he formed with Jeremiah Dyson, esq. a young gentleman of family and fortune, who studied civil law at the same University, and to whose liberality, Akenside was indebted for much of the comfort he enjoyed through the future portion of his life. These two friends, on accomplishing the object of their residence in Holland, which occurred in the summer of 1744, returned to London. The manuscript of "The Pleasures of Imagination" was sent to Dodsley, the bookseller, who, on Pope's recommendation, gave for the copy right the sum of one hundred and twenty pounds. Though published anonymously, it immediately rose into general favour, and with men of taste has ever since maintained its original position. Shortly afterwards he published an epistle to Curio, meaning thereby Pultney, earl of Bath, in which he unmercifully exhibited that individual as having, for an empty title, betrayed the confidence which his patriotic countrymen had placed in his hands.

Our poet first commenced his career as a physician at Northampton; but a Dr. Stonehouse having previously been established there, who commanded an extensive practice, no stranger could reasonably expect any share of success. While residing here, we may conclude, that as he had much leisure, he would employ it chiefly on composition; and it has been observed that several of his best odes were written at this place. In the course of eighteen months, sickened with deferred hope, he returned to London, and his friend Mr. Dyson, with the view of promoting the poet's welfare, purchased a house at Northend, Hampstead, removed him thither, and introduced him to nearly all the respectable families in that neighbourhood. That gentleman with unwearied assiduity, accompanied him to the various public assemblies, in order that he might more particularly bring him into public notice. To a certain degree, the good offices

of Mr. Dyson were ineffectual; for Akenside had either too much pride, or not sufficient suavity to secure the good opinion of many, whose favour would have most essentially contributed to his benefit. He was scarcely more successful at Hampstead than he had been at Northampton: he persevered, however, for a time, and at length his never-failing friend, Mr. Dyson, disposed of the villa he possessed there, and removed with him again to London. Besides, with a liberality which has rarely been surpassed, and which reflects the highest honour on the character of that gentleman, he placed the poet in a small house at Bloomsbury Square, and presented him with £300 per annum; a sum which enabled him to keep a carriage, and make a respectable appearance in the exercise of his profession.

Akenside was now in his twenty seventh year: his fame as a poet was established: he sought to extend his practice, and was even successful amongst a number of families in an opulent sphere of life. Still he never obtained that wide spread popularity, which brings a physician into conference with all classes of society, and, at the same time yields him a proportional remuneration. It has been said that his skill, and professional sagacity were not of the first order. This I am not prepared to deny, yet believe the charge may be somewhat mitigated. The biography of medical men, and chiefly those who have earned a name in literature, affords many examples of failure in the walk of public life. Probably Akenside's poetical fame, and downright honesty of manner preponderated against him. He appears, nevertheless, to have encountered his difficulties bravely, and he lost no opportunity of making himself generally known. Besides maintaining an intimacy with nearly the whole number of Mr. Dyson's friends, he published several essays on the subject of medicine, which proved that he had advanced far in a sound knowledge of its principles. He was also fortunate in obtaining many honours which fall to the lot of distinguished medical professors. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society, and was admitted by Mandamus to the degree of Doctor of Physic: he was chosen Physician to St. Thomas's hospital, and made a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians; moreover, he was elected reader of a department of lectures, and appointed one of the Physicians to the Queen. Yet amid all the duties connected with these offices, he did not forget that on the banks of the stream where he spent his early days, the muse bade him swear to follow her through the whole period of his pilgrimage, and, considering that his chief poem required much alteration and correction, he not only continued to re-construct and re-write it, but composed many shorter pieces, nearly all of which appeared in "Dodsley's Collection." For all the regard and good feeling however which were in many in-



GRAMMAR SCHOOL, Newcastle, during its removal in 1844.

stances shewn to Akenside, he did not pursue his way through the world without encountering from several quarters considerable opposition. Neither was he deficient in courage when drawn into collision with an opponent, although candour obliges me to state that in some of the following illustrations of his character, he exhibited more rancour against those who stood in his path than was consistent with a generous spirit. The personage whom he designated as Momion, in the third book of the *Pleasures of Imagination*, was Richard Daves already mentioned—his teacher at the Royal Grammar school. What provocation Akenside had for composing the lines in which he is so irreverently handled I am unable to say, but for the poet's honour they had better not appeared. Those who conduct us only one step towards the temple of knowledge, or remove a single impediment in our road thither, however awkwardly the service may be performed, ought at least to escape nor reproach. In one of the notes to his chief poem, Akenside adopted Shaftsbury's idea of ridicule being efficacious in the discovery of truth,—for which he was rudely attacked by the redoubted champion in literary controversy, Warburton. His friend Dyson defended him; but an assault of this kind was neither to be easily forgotten nor forgiven by Akenside; and subsequently an opportunity presented itself, by which he took ample satisfaction on the dignified critic. Warburton's pen, through his connection with Pope, had been employed in scribbling the most

severe things against Theobald, Concannen and others, who were shewn up to public derision in the *Dunciad*. It also occurred that an unlucky letter of his, written in 1726 to the said Concannen, came into the possession of Akenside, proving that the dignitary himself was, at that time, one of the party who levelled their most pointed shafts against the Bard of Twickenham. This important document with all its peculiarities of spelling and grammar, Akenside published with his ode to Mr. Edwards in 1766, and it told heavily against the authority which Warburton for a lengthened period had maintained in the empire of criticism. In the course of a debate at Tom's Coffee house, it happened that Akenside was drawn into a quarrel with a councillor Ballow, to whom he sent a challenge, but the man of law kept aloof from personal danger, until by the aid of friends, the difference was overcome. An anonymous writer, in the 63rd vol. of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, asserted that papers were in his possession, bearing evidence of Akenside, while he lived at Northampton, having resorted to the most unhandsome modes of assailing Dr. Stonehouse, with the design of either wresting his business from him, or expelling him from the town. This conduct, if the statement be correct, is still more reprehensible, from the circumstance of that gentleman's behaviour to Akenside, being always of the most civil and obliging description. Success did not, however, at all times attend Akenside in his quarrels. By throwing out some illiberal reflections against Scotland, he incurred the resentment of Dr. Smollet; and the result was that the patriotic novelist by way of revenge, selected the poet as the prototype of the ridiculous physician in *Peregrine Pickle*. Very much in the character undoubtedly is fictitious, but the case, considering Akenside's ability and principles, throws a shadow over the magnanimity of the outrageous Scotsman.

Regarding Akenside from another point of view, it is evident that his mind was peculiarly fitted to the enjoyment of intellectual life. He was a warm admirer of Gothic architecture, Meyrick relates that he used to find him contemplating with great earnestness the exterior of Westminster abbey; and at night when the broad moon shone unclouded from on high, he was accustomed to sit on the benches in Saint James's park, and lingeringly gaze on that sublime structure. This finely indicates the existence of that faculty within him, which has been accounted a gift, and is indeed a blessing, from the sympathy it maintains with all objects of delight and loveliness—enriching itself by its very exercise, whether in participating the grandeur of the ocean, or culling a sweeter essence from the rose than its own grateful perfume. With his excellent taste and relish for poetry and philosophy, the leisure hours he shared from business

were, in all probability, devoted to close communion with those master spirits, whose works may be considered a rich inheritance through all time to the thinking portion of mankind. Though he never married, he entertained, as many passages in his writings shew, a high opinion of the gentler portion of humanity, accounting them, to use his own language, "chief of terrestrial nature;" and he lived in the most agreeable intercourse with a large circle of friends who were fully able to appreciate his genius. We are told that in the presence of those he loved, his conversation was exceedingly graceful and eloquent. Possessing splendid poetical talents, he had the power of reasoning admirably; and being endowed with a retentive memory, his knowledge of history and literature was most extensive,—hence his brilliant allusions, and philosophical mode of illustrating almost every subject, contributed to render him an instructive and valuable companion. He was fond of collecting books and prints: of the latter his portfolio contained a large number, from the most eminent Dutch and Italian painters, which he illustrated with singular propriety. He had also the privilege of reading gratis all the books of note which at that period were published in Britain: his opinion was accounted valuable, and if he expressed himself much gratified with any work, the bookseller generally presented him with a copy. As another proof of the esteem in which he was held on account of his literary talents, I may observe that Thomas Hollis, esq. distinguished for his patriotism, having purchased a bed which formerly belonged to John Milton, generously presented it to Akenside with a request that he would write an ode to the memory of the author of "Paradise Lost." He very gladly accepted the donation, but no proof exists that the ode was written. Probably, the difficulty he felt at doing justice in rhyme to the genius of the immortal poet deterred him from the attempt.

It must be admitted that in general society, Akenside had a stiffness and solemnity of deportment, which made those with whom he was not intimately acquainted rather shun than court his company. Dressed also in a way, to use Hardinge's expression, "as if he never could be undressed," and wearing a powdered wig always in stiff curl, he had a prim, precise and rather grotesque appearance. Entertaining, in a literary point of view, a very high estimate of his own worth, he was frequently ungracious and dictatorial amongst strangers, especially those whose opinions were dissimilar to his own. Being deficient in the faculty of wit, and possessing no turn for humour, he could not endure the playful sallies of these in others, hence he hated all jesting whatever. To a certain degree he was without that buoyancy of heart which embraces all mankind in one bond of brotherhood;

and, therefore, he never cultivated acquaintanceship with any of the poets who were contemporary with himself. In justice, however, to his character, it is gratifying to say that with the most amiable feeling, he set a candid value on such pieces as they had respectively given to the world. He estimated Dyer's *Fleece* highly and observed he would regulate his estimate of public taste by the fate of that poem ; for if it were ill received, he should not think it reasonable to expect fame from poetical excellence. It is probable that Thomson's *Seasons* ranged also in the first class of his favourites, and may have furnished him with some hints in sketching out his own principal work. The purpose of each is different, but in several points they are not unlike each other. Partaking in common of a discursive character, they contain much beautiful and minute description ; and the numerous bursts of genuine poetry to be found in both, are equal if not superior to any the last century has produced.

It is asserted that the halt in Akenside's gait, occasioned by the fall of a cleaver in his father's shop, as already stated, perpetually reminded him of his humble origin of which he felt ashamed. Brand who records this was undoubtedly satisfied of its truth ; and candidly speaking, it was not inconsistent with what we may be led to expect from one whose mental constitution has been shaken by influences similar to those which operated on Akenside. Long dependance on his patron Dyson, together with the habit of living so much in artificial society, had, in all likelihood, engendered within him a species of false pride, by which he considered it would detract from his fame and dignity were it known he was descended from the middle ranks of the people. Great men are not without their failings, and if this view of the poet be correct, he was much to be pitied. More highly exalted, in all that enobles human nature, is the simple peasant who procures his bread by the labour of his hands, and, conscious that no shame is linked with poverty, raises his head unabashed to the world, resolving neither servilely to court its favour, nor shrinkingly to fear its frown.

The latter part of Akenside's life affords few particulars deserving of notice. He lived well ; and with a prospect before him of possessing a sufficiency of this world's substance, he probably hoped to descend honourably into "the vale of years." Alas ! how frequently our anticipations of happiness here, under the most favourable aspect, are only delusive ! In the 49th year of his age, he was seized with a putrid sore throat, which baffled all medical skill, and he died at his house in Bloomsbury-square on the 29th June, 1770. He was buried at Westminster, in St. James's parish church ; and his books, prints, manuscripts, and other property, according to his own desire,

came by administration into the hands of his great friend and benefactor, Mr. Dyson.

In person Akenside was about the middle size, of a slender form, pale complexion, and rather sickly in appearance; yet his features were manly, his forehead was broad but not high, and his eyes were large and uncommonly expressive. On looking at his portrait, both the attitude and outline of the face are fine, and would seem to have been caught in one of those happy moments of inspiration, wherein the great triumph of the poet is consummated. The free, open, undisguised look of the figure reminds us much of the semblance of Goethe, save that on the upper portion of the head, Akenside would appear to lack something which supported in unwearied action the genius and noble enthusiasm of the illustrious German.

On taking into deliberate consideration the leading points of Akenside's character, I am impressed with the idea that had he judged aright, he would not have abandoned the first aim with which he set out in life—that of becoming a minister of the gospel. It is probable his views were more worldly than spiritual, and that he conceived the walk of divinity too narrow for the full developement of his natural powers. Supposing this to be the case, how far, I may ask, did the profession he pursued accord with that object? It seems to me that he followed it out more as the means of gaining him a livelihood, than for any care or love he had for it; and whatever dreams he cherished as to the avenues of honour or distinction it would open up before him, year after year passed away and they were never realized. The fact is that, to the exclusion of better motives, Akenside's belief in his own importance as a man of genius, was ever uppermost in his mind, and his happiest moments were spent in company with those who either acknowledged this foible, or administered to its gratification. He had the desire of appearing to be a great man as a physician; but we have few proofs that he undertook, with his wonted energy, the labour of alleviating by his skill the diseases of the afflicted poor—of forgetting self in the earnestness of doing good to suffering humanity;—actions which at least would have been indicative of true greatness. He wrote medical essays and appeared frequently before the public; but he was still without extensive practice—never reaching the highest degree of his calling: and if he sighed after independance, he was through life the receiver of another's bounty. Hence, I am of opinion that adhering to divinity, he had, under the blessing of God, been a far happier man. Possessing sufficient leisure for the perusal of favourite authors, and living in constant communion with the source of goodness itself, they of that profession, while continuing in a faithful discharge of duty, are blessed beyond

all others in the enjoyment of peace throughout life, and comfort at death. And it follows that being rarely gifted as an orator, with a mind finely susceptible of truth, a lover of learning, and well versed in general knowledge, Akenside might, had the Spirit of Holiness touched his heart, have become a distinguished advocate for the glory of the Cross, and contributed to elevate the mode of faith he originally professed to its proper standard in English society. The past and present history of man furnishes many noble examples that religious truth, instead of narrowing the sphere of human ability, is a never failing source of light, energy and life to all minds under its power, and proportionally to those of an exalted order.*

It now remains for us to consider what Akenside as an author bequeathed to the world. Amongst his shorter pieces, some stand out as striking specimens of the versatility of his genius, indicating he might have accomplished much in other departments than that wherein he constructed his great work. The truth is that in early life he drank deeply and devotedly at the wells of ancient literature; and this in a great measure influenced whatever subsequently came from his pen. He was also an earnest lover of freedom, worshipping her with a poet's ardour, and his *British Philip* written in early life, together with his ode to the Country Gentleman of England,† are amongst the noblest patriotic appeals in our language. His epistle to Curio is perhaps less a satire, than an overwhelming torrent of honest indignation. True it is, he had no skill to cut with a razor, but prostration without recovery succeeded the blow of his mallet. His inscriptions are simple, yet most forcible, and have in recent times been regarded as models to this species of writing. But of all his shorter poems, the hymn to the Naiads has by competent judges been accounted the most beautiful. So perfectly classical in tone, spirit and execution, it is worthy of a place with the hymns of Homer or Callimachus.

The Pleasures of Imagination has now been a century before the public, and thereon chiefly rests the fame of Akenside. He produced it in his twenty-third year, and it is remarkable as the work of so young an author. The philosophy of the human mind early attracted his attention, and he seems to have formed the design from Addison's celebrated papers on the same subject, with some portion of Shaftes-

* They who desire knowledge on this point would do well to look into some of the few tracts written by the rev. James Hamilton, London.

† When Mr. Elliot, father to Lord Minto, made an admirable speech in parliament in favour of the Scotch militia, and was complimented thereon, he observed, "that he was above himself, being awakened to the grandeur of his subject by the sublime ode of Dr. Akenside."

bury's *Characteristics*, and Hutcheson's *Inquiry into our ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. The object, as the late Thomas Campbell observed, "was to trace the various pleasures we derive from Nature and Art to their respective principles in the human imagination ; and to shew the connection of these principles with the moral dignity of man, and the final purposes of his creation." To the task Akenside brought great talents ; so if he failed in giving to the world a perfect production, the defect arose not so much from his lack of ability, as from the intricacy and unsettled bearings of what he undertook to perform. Though unequal as a whole it is still regarded as the finest didactic poem in our language. But here lay Akenside's great strength ; and consequently, its noble paragraphs, pregnant with energy, seem to have been dashed off by his pen in the fervour of poetic inspiration. Many of its passages which continue to be used as texts by popular authors must strike the student as possessing singular force and beauty. I have often thought that more similarity may be found between Mark Akenside's verse and Edmund Burke's prose than is generally admitted. Both authors possessed great command of language, hence their diction is not only brilliant but remarkably flexible, and abounding with bursts of vast intellectual power. Probably we should have loved the poet better after all, had it been his habit to think more and read less, because in that case his air in writing had been less classical, and we had received from him a greater amount of originality. In composition, if words are not the offspring of fervid feeling or concentrated thought, they are like arrows shot without an aim, rarely striking the mark : we read on and seek for what in sparing measure we receive. In mature life Akenside re-modelled and re-wrote the *Pleasures of Imagination*, which, in its altered state, was published after his death, without materially advancing his fame. All lovers of poetry prefer it as it came from the author's hand, when his mind was in the highest degree susceptible of those emotions, under the influence of which almost every work in the loftier departments of genius can alone be brought to a successful termination.

It is not strange in this age, when Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and above all others, Shakspeare are steadily advancing in extended reputation, that Akenside should remain stationary. He has slight claim to that wonderful knowledge of nature by which these men are distinguished, neither does he approach them in creative power, nor grasp of intellect, nor habits of thinking, whether directed to our immortal destiny or the various impulses of human life ; and it follows he is by no means a popular poet. Again, on account of his brilliant fancy, and appropriate language, he will be read and appreciated by

all who make English poetry a favourite study. He occupies a niche in our literary temple, from which succeeding generations will not displace him ; and it becomes us to hail him in his descent to future time as one of the eminent men of letters who adorned the eighteenth century.



